

## THE DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS FOR GOZO

**Mario Tabone**

**T**his paper attempts to explore a prospective view, a possible scenario for the future of Gozo. This exercise is not intended to be in the nature of a prophecy, but an invitation to an imaginative leap to the future.

Gozo is at present going through a historical watershed. Up to a few years ago, the island languished in the periphery of national life, with primitive services, bureaucratic neglect, lack of opportunities in all sectors and, in fact, constituted the “backwoods” in the national psychology. There is usually a metaphor to symbolise the back of beyond in most countries; it is usually geographic in character, like the East or the South; for so many years, Gozo was the metaphor for backwardness. In the last few years, Gozo has made a quantum jump in development—from a third World backwater, located in a corner of the national field of vision, to a central position in national consciousness. There has been a veritable awakening, an explosive and unprecedented expansion in all services and sectors of social life — health, education, infrastructure, administration, transport, public works, employment and sports.

Directly represented in Cabinet, decolonised, so to speak from centuries of central hegemony, Gozo found its voice and identity and confidence and created a bonanza in entrepreneurship, investment and business activity in general, raising the standard of living and social expectations. No doubt, growth has peaked in Gozo — and now, let us not cavil or begrudge this prosperity — after all Gozo had to make up for centuries of neglect and marginalisation.

But where do we go from here? Are we to pursue, frenetically, further expansion and development? Should we maintain the pressure on land utilisation? Should we occupy, crowd, hem and choke open spaces? Is Malta to be assumed as the role model? Is our aim to convert Gozo into

a commercial and industrial hub, mesmerised, as we all are, by the glittering success of a Hong Kong or Singapore? Do we believe in a path where the hectic tempo of activity and frenzied statistics continue to rise to a crescendo? Is this course the “open sesame” to a humane future or the fateful key to a Pandora’s box?

The proposals to be made in this paper, in reply to these questions, are underpinned by a particular point of view based on the following premises:

1. Gozo is another centre of national life and not just another peripheral district;
2. Gozo expects and deserves parity – as distinguished from identity – of development with Malta;
3. No social or ecological system is capable of infinite development;
4. “Development in Gozo is not only a matter of social justice but a *sine qua non* for the attainment of national development” (see Tabone 1992: 4-6).
5. National life is enriched by the co-existence of different models of development and a diversity of options.
6. The landscape, social fabric, the organic balance between countryside and towns and villages – in short, the unique charm and topography of Gozo can be irretrievably savaged in one generation.
7. Development can be broadly defined as the mobilisation of all resources (human and natural) to attain the maximum standard of living and the highest quality of life for all; “quality of life” is crucial in the equation, since there may be ‘developments’ which are neither sustainable nor defensible from the human point of view since they impoverish the quality of life or irreversibly degrade the environment.

### Choosing the Options

A bi-polar tension and dialectic between two contending scenarios may promote the psychological health of a country. In the case of the Maltese islands the two scenarios may be termed, for convenience, the urban-industrial, on the one hand, and the arcadian, on the other.

The first pole may be characterised by intense commercial and business development, compressed into densely populated down-town areas or industrial heartlands, where nature has been practically displaced by

## *The Development Options for Gozo*

man's incessant termite activity, factories, offices, traffic jams, power plants, tight schedules and the breathless rat-race.

The attraction of this pole is the money it generates and material advancement it ushers in, but it has its ugly side. As early as 1904, Max Weber, in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* cautioned that the mighty cosmos of the modern economic order is creating an "iron cage" for man. And, back in the sixties, Marcuse, in his *One Dimensional Man* opined that: "The people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobiles, hi-fi sets, split-level homes and kitchen equipment". In short, man is short-changed, reduced to his own meretricious products.

The other pole may be characterised by open spaces, the archetypal wild west and rolling steppes, the green countryside, where man is still integrated in the rhythms of nature and still has time to stand and stare.

The attraction of this pole could be associated with a call, buried deep in our psychology, of the hinterland, of pristine nature, where the works of man are in harmony with their surroundings. In our small country, Gozo is a symbol of the primeval, arcadian call. Gozo is real, very real; it is also a mental landscape.

With Thoreau (1854) in his *Walden*, we wonder: "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Modern man has a dire need for a refuge from what Rousseau calls *le tourbillion social* (the social whirlwind).

In its extreme form the second pole is associated, in the context of Gozo, with a pastoral way of life – a *presepju*<sup>1</sup> scenario – which, in the case of Gozo, is neither realistic nor defensible. After all, Gozo is not a *presepju* and the Gozitans are certainly no *pasturi*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Gozo's "green option" should aim for high-grade development and the use of science and technology to harmonise: development, conservation and enrichment of the environment, renovation of urban areas, containment of population pressure, and maintenance of traditional culture.

---

1. *Presepju* is a three dimensional model of the Christmas nativity scene with a crib taking centre stage. It is exhibited in many Maltese houses during christmas time.

2. *Pasturi* are the small statuettes in the *presepju* representing the main figures associated with the nativity, including the shepherds.



**St Francis Square, Victoria, prior to the 1930s: an attractive picture, when even the urban centre of Gozo looked like a scene from a *presepio*. The island was however characterised by widespread economic backwardness.**

It is being suggested that, rather than follow the traditional industrial model pursued by Malta, Gozo should choose the “green option” just briefly described. It is important to stress at this junction that this option does not imply resignation to underdevelopment or the abandonment of technology.

Gozo is an ecological-cultural niche which is worth preserving and nurturing. Incidentally, the environment does not connote solely a physical dimension but also a living, complex structure of beliefs, relationships, traditions and values. Historically, societies developed haphazardly, buffeted by the whims of nature and man. Now, they can be steered by the use of the imagination and the implementation of goal-oriented policies.

## **Some Suggestions for Gozo's Development**

Development, of the sustainable type, is a vast and complex subject, and it has been treated at some depth elsewhere (see for example the UNCED 1992; United Nations 1995; Bank of Valletta 1992). All this paper intends to do is to highlight some ideas and suggestions in the hope that this would stimulate further thought and public debate.

### *Space*

Space is the major constraint on our development. Whereas it is true that we cannot change the size of our islands, we are in a position to increase space. Certain facilities can be located underground; car-parks, stores, electricity substations, pumping stations, petrol and gas storages etc. The technology already exists and policy-makers ought to be aware of this dimension. The environment would be spared and construction and engineering stimulated. For example, a large multistorey, underground car-park can be built under the one adjoining the Bus Terminus at Taht Putirjal; such a facility would decongest the city, especially over week-ends and in summer, and promote the development of more pedestrian zones.

### *Stone Quarries*

There are a number of deep, abandoned stone-quarries scarring the landscape. There are a number of ways in which these could be utilised. It is possible, for example, to site a helicopter pad with attendant infrastructure, e.g. car-park, terminal and other support services in these quarries.

With some imagination and daring entrepreneurship, quarries could be converted into holiday complexes or even housing estates, with hanging or terraced chalets or flats and a large central swimming pool. Such an enterprise would pose engineering challenges and open up new aesthetic vistas.

One could also site a large, marine aquarium, together with an on-land experimental aquaculture centre. Finally, and perhaps less ambitiously, some of these quarries could be converted into orchards.



**Mgarr – the only serviceable harbour in Gozo – undergoing relentless pressure of development, congestion and gradual destruction of its unique topography.**

### *Ports*

Malta has had the singular advantage of having several natural, deep-sea harbours. Historically, brisk commercial, social and political developments sprouted and flourished in areas adjoining harbours.

Gozo, on the other hand, is poor in natural coastal indentations, and Mgarr is practically the only serviceable harbour. But, perhaps, it is time to think about building a man-made harbour to take regular and intensified passenger and cargo traffic. This would relieve Mgarr of the relentless pressure of development, congestion and gradual destruction of its unique topography. The yacht marina could be extended, more berthing facilities made available for the fishing fleet and the inimitable natural amphitheatre, that is Mgarr, artfully developed.

### *Aquaculture*

Aquaculture is a nascent industry but already burgeoning. There are three areas ripe for development: fish hatching, fish feeding, and fish farming. The Mediterranean, sad to say, is becoming biologically poorer.

## *The Development Options for Gozo*

It is time for science to come to the aid of traditional fishing. Some fishermen may be encouraged to diversify their activities to fish farming, especially the young. New skills and ambitions have to be promoted.

Malta is already exporting impressive tonnage from fish-farms and this is bound to increase. The future fisherman may be one with a science degree in marine biology.

### *Marine Station*

Being a small island surrounded by sea, our stake in the sea is unavoidably of a high order. A marine station would serve a number of major functions, including the monitoring of the quality and safety of sea-water and the surveying fish stocks by using state of the art technology.

Other useful purposes of a marine station could include the study of the dynamics of the surrounding seas, wave amplitude, currents and coastal erosion; the study of the submarine eco-system and biodiversity; and the teaching of basic science courses to fishermen, including fish-stocks, reproductive cycles, migration and so on.

### *Building*

The planning criteria and parameters adopted nationwide for building do not necessarily apply to Gozo. There are specific characteristics of Gozo which need particular attention.

A Structure Plan for Gozo should ascertain that:

- buildings do not drip down from the plateaux;
- ribbon building development should not destroy the traditional topography or relatively isolated villages surrounded by countryside;
- certain landscapes and vistas of natural beauty have to be salvaged from irresponsible land speculators;
- massive, cyclopean structures destroy the aesthetics of the natural scale of the Gozitan landscape and ought to be disallowed;
- the extensive use of underground space should be actively investigated and adopted;
- the ratio of built-up to non-built up areas in Gozo should be radically different from that in Malta.

*Ecozone*

Gozo can be declared an ecozone, where strict control of air pollution is enforced and would-be factories required to comply with recommendations laid down by a qualified body, such as the Clean Technology Institute of the University of Malta.

Traffic pollution in such a zone would have to be brought down to a relatively low level. Towards this end public transport could gradually be converted to electric motors. After all, distances in Gozo are not great and speed is not important.

The noise level, especially in certain areas, should be regulated, controlled and abusers penalised.

Private houses and factories could be induced by tax rebates to adopt energy-saving devices, like solar heaters.

There are large areas on the island crying out for a programme of afforestation.

A number of problems threaten the eco-system; local research in this regard should be funded to come up with the solution to local problems rather than the cavalier importation of ready-made pat schemes.

*Agriculture*

The Gozitan community has been an essentially agricultural one. Agriculture "... is not only an economic model, but a holistic scenario, involving type of architecture, tempo of life, social behaviour, stability of family relationships and belief systems and an exquisite balance with the environment, optimising the rigours and generosity of nature to create a tenaciously lasting way of life. Agriculture, therefore, is not only an economic activity, not only one of the pillars of sustainable development, but an essential dimension of the future course of Gozitan evolution, as it is deeply rooted in Gozitan history and psychology" (Tabone 1994:7).

The agricultural sector in Gozo is on the decline. From 1971 to 1991 the number of full-time farmers dropped from 1600 to 225; agricultural land



## *The Development Options for Gozo*

went down from 26,000 to 15,000 *tumuli* and from 1971 to 1983, the idle agricultural land in Gozo jumped from 24.5 to 47.8% of all idle agricultural land in the Maltese islands. To arrest this decline, one needs a paradigm shift — away from the industrial and commercial model to a more positive perception people have of agriculture. This need not be the social and economic backwater that the younger generation think that it is. With the introduction of scientific methods, proper management, fair pricing and adequate funding, agriculture could still offer a prosperous livelihood.

The School of Agriculture must be geared to offer high-grade courses to prepare a generation of motivated and enlightened agricultural workers and businessmen. This is a sector where investment in science and technology ought to have priority. Agriculture can wed the apparently antagonistic trends of conservation and development, offer a broader choice of education and work, and preserve for cultivation the wide-open spaces in Gozo.

### *Water*

Water is the major limiting factor on agricultural development and environmental enrichment. An intensive study, using an Integrated Research Management approach is vital regarding production, consumption, distribution and conservation of water.

Apart from its production from bore-holes, a Reverse Osmosis plant may be necessary. As in so many other areas, there may not be one, magic solution but a number of solutions. The use of blue clay reservoirs in valleys could certainly help small-time farmers, especially if the irrigation system is upgraded.

It is estimated that only 5 % of total land cultivated in Gozo is classified as irrigable, so the problem of water and irrigation is one of some magnitude. In this regard, the re-utilisation of wind-driven water-pumps should be re-assessed.

### *Science Park*

The basic concept underlying the construction of a Science Park is to

invite a number of high-tech companies to set up house for research purposes. It is important to emphasise that they would not be engaging in any production and that the research and research methods would not involve biological or toxic hazards or other environmental dangers. Companies who are likely to be attracted towards a Science Park would normally have high-flying scientists of the first order, who can interact with local University and other educational institutions and upgrade levels through their intellectual input.

### *Education*

Education is the bedrock on which any future can be based. There should be more emphasis on science teaching at all levels, in primary, secondary and vocational schools.

The Gozo Centre of the University should now plan science courses in fields like agriculture, marine biology or environmental science. Young people still seem to opt, preferentially, for traditional professions, like doctors, lawyers and architects. This is a well-known social phenomenon, leading young people from historically depressed areas to hanker for bourgeois ideals and social legitimisation. It is time for educationists and vocational advisers to enlighten the young that the stage has been superseded. We need scientists, engineers, technologists and scientific workers in all spheres.

There are a cluster of areas that could utilise the expertise of Gozitan scientists including soil erosion and enrichment; disposal of liquid and solid waste; renewable sources of energy; the conservation and creation of beaches; the cultivation of plants and trees suitable for our terrain and so on.

### **Conclusion**

This main argument in this discussion on the development options for Gozo is that the future of Gozo does not lie in what one might call the Third World fallacy: that the way to conserve Gozo as a particular ecosystem lies in underdevelopment. On the contrary, the path lies in greater sophistication, in the astute choice of social goals and the

## *The Development Options for Gozo*

adoption of scientific methods to solve practical social and environmental problems.

In any scenario, like in any paradise, lurk some demons and I would like to finish by cautioning against three temptations:

- it may not be true that the more and the bigger, the better;
- Gozitans should conserve traditional skills and cultivate new ones in order to retain a viable community with an identity;
- Gozitans should beware of the temptation to become, simply, caretakers (builders, drivers, caterers) for an ever-expanding and rapacious tourist industry.

This paper has dealt with one aspect of the complex drama of modernity, namely development, where we are no mere bystanders watching the cue of a whimsical director — but in fact, actors and protagonists. To be a bystander is to be a guilty bystander, after all.

We have to appreciate the tools of modern life to overcome the problems of under-development as we have to understand the mistakes of the past to stall and dam the problems of over-development.

## **References**

- Bank of Valletta** (1992). *Sustainable Development in Gozo, through the Nineties and Beyond*. Malta: Bank of Valletta Publication.
- Bank of Valletta** (1993). *Transport the Pillar of Sustainable Development in Gozo*. Malta: Bank of Valletta Publication.
- Bank of Valletta** (1994). *Agriculture: Pillar of Sustainable Development*. Malta: Bank of Valletta Publication.
- Marcuse, Herbert** (1966). *One Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rousseau, J. J.** (1761). *Julie ou La Nouvelle Heloise*.
- Tabone, M.** (1992). "Sustainable Development in Gozo." In *Sustainable Development in Gozo, Through the Nineties and Beyond*. Malta: Bank of Valletta Publication.
- Tabone, M.** (1994). "Agriculture in Gozo - The Third Dimension." In *Agriculture: Pillar of Sustainable Development*. Malta: Bank of Valletta Publication.

**Thoreau, David, H.** (1854). *Walden. or Life in the Woods.*

**UNCED** (1992). *Agenda 21: A Guide to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.* Geneva: UN Publications Services.

**United Nations** (1995). *The Programme of Action of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.* New York.

**Weber, Max** (1930). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Originally published in 1904. (Translated by Talcott Parkinson). London: Allen and Unwin.